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ABSTRACT

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Mythos East and West: The Mythic Conceptions of Soul, Rebirth, and Salvation in the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita*

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Abstract:
Mythic elements are often found at the very heart of both eastern and western philosophical and religious tradition. This paper seeks to examine the uses of myth in conveying important concepts of soul, rebirth, and salvation in two seminal texts—Plato's *Phaedrus* and the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*. In drawing from narrative theory, this inquiry demonstrates that while certain mythic elements are similar, fundamental differences emerge in mythic conceptions due to the divergent ideals of self in both cultures.

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Introduction

Plato has been labeled as the single-most important philosopher in the western tradition; indeed, it was his framing of certain issues and questions that have led modern philosophy in many of the directions it now travels (Stumpf, 1993; Taylor, 1936). An important element in the Socratic dialogues composed by Plato was the prevalence of myth. These "fictional" accounts were often used to make an important point without delving into the more complicated debate over proof and evidence for these foundational claims. While Fisher (1987) notes that Plato eventually transformed *logos* into its current form, which "relegate[d] *mythos* to myth (meaning fictional)" (p. 7), his earlier dialogues often refer to myths in their capacity to illustrate important truths or presuppositions for further discourse. Thus, prior to the pejorative connotation placed on the use of *mythos* in dialogue, a myth was utilized as a "sacred narrative [that] explain[s] how the world and mankind came to be in their present form" (Dundes, 1996, p. 147). It is this use of myth that modern and contemporary philosophic thought has largely ignored; yet it is the ability of myth to function in such important ways philosophically and socially that warrant critical attention (Campbell, 1988; 1990; Doniger, 1998).

In the ancient world of India, another tradition was blossoming that combined religious and philosophic thought together in a unique fashion. Ancient Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* use mythic elements to convey the grandeur of human life, the ultimate metaphysical reality, and the moral path to salvation to individuals. In a similar way to Plato's early and middle dialogues, myth in ancient Hindu texts still holds an important role that has not yet been subsumed by *logos* and technical rationality. As Babbili (1997) indicates, much of the philosophical and religious "truth" of Hinduism is conveyed through narratives that resemble works of fiction, myth, fable, and historical recollection. Myth is not seen as a detriment to the philosophic thought of the Hindu sages, but instead as another linguistic tool to convey some important truth.

While some comparative research has been undertaken concerning Plato's account of Socrates' death and the death of the Buddha (Dillon, 2000) and the views of Plato and Confucius on poetry (Cai, 1999), a detailed examination of ancient Hindu and Platonic use of myth is absent. Seeking to address this exigency, this paper will explicate the important role that mythic elements play in Plato's middle dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, and the ancient Hindu poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*. It shall be shown that it is through mythic elements that these two narratives propose philosophic positions on the nature of the soul, the nature of rebirth, and the path to salvation. This paper will illustrate some similarities that these two uses of mythic elements have in common. This inquiry will also argue, however, that the ultimate positions of these myths are incommensurate due to foundational presuppositions concerning the self as a collective or as individuated. It is through reconstructing the mythic arguments put forward in these two texts that scholars can better examine the foundations of our tradition in relation to the basis of another, putatively remote tradition. In order to accomplish this, the first section of this paper will briefly discuss the methodology of narrative and its utility in extracting arguments from stories and myths. The paper will then move on to an analysis of the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita* in regard to three dimensions: their conception of the soul, the role of rebirth and moral worth, and the general path to salvation. It should be noted that this inquiry shall limit itself to the largely mythic elements of the *Phaedrus*, as other portions of it rely more on overt argument and not upon narrative. The paper shall conclude with some remarks on what can be gleaned from the emergent positions within these two mythic narratives in relation to our understanding of our philosophical tradition and its relation to the Hindu tradition.

Methodology of Narrative

Fisher (1987) has argued that narrative works (such as myth, stories, etc.) can and do convey arguments. He points out that modern discourse has become too reliant on technical rationality and formal logic; instead, a return to the ancient emphasis on *mythos*, through narrative, is needed. All argument and discourse is narrative, so Fisher proposes that it not only be analyzed as such, but also that public moral argument must become a forum for all to tell stories, not just the "experts." Fisher (1985) continues his theorizing of narrative by examining the process of technical rationality's growth in contemporary and ancient civilizations, with an emphasis on how the narrative critic is to function in opposition to this totalized power structure of "logic" and "rationality."

Informing the basis for a theoretical rebellion against this paradigm of rationality was MacIntyre (1981), who indicated, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal" (p. 201). Taking this foundational link to human narration, Fisher (1984) argues that this dominant paradigm for human interaction, the "rational world paradigm," was defunct and did not address all the aspects of human communication. It is this reaction against modernity that Toulmin (1992) recounts in his history of modernity and its influences on communication and thought. Thus, in Fisher's (1987) seminal work, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, he proposes that human communication takes the form of a narrative or story that can be examined and criticized accordingly. Fisher conceptualizes this "narrative rationality" as being roughly equivalent to a neo-Kantian "form of experience"; he argues that all individuals and all cultures view communicative practice as a narrative. These narratives are stories or discourses that potentially contain good reasons to act and/or believe. Thus, narrative rationality addresses how humans are motivated to change, modify, or strengthen their will to action and/or their beliefs toward some aspect of society. Even though Fisher (2000) is moving his research toward the ethical implications of narrative theory, this central idea has continued to inspire a multitude of work with the narrative paradigm, both in regard to theory and to critical practice.

Narrative theory can be important for analyzing seemingly "non-philosophical" aspects of a text to ascertain the arguments and claims that they advance. Indeed, Lewis (1995) summarizes the position of narrative theorists by discussing the utility of narratives in conveying such important claims:

> narrative is a fundamental form of human understanding that directs perception, judgment, and knowledge. Narrative form shapes ontology by making meaningfulness a product of consistent relationships between situations, subjects, and events and by making truth a property that refers primarily to narratives and only secondarily to propositions; narrative form shapes morality by placing characters and events within a context where moral judgment is a necessary part of making sense of the action; and narrative form shapes epistemology by suggesting that all important events are open to common sense understanding. (p. 302)

Thus, meaning for an audience in terms of morality, ontology, and epistemology can be shaped by narrative elements such as myths. Lewis also indicates that his work supports Bennett and Feldman's (1981) analysis of the role of empirical support in narrative—"structural characteristics of stories become more central to judgment . . . [if] facts or documentary evidence are absent . . . [or if] a collection of facts or evidence is subject to competing interpretations" (p. 89). Therefore, moral issues are found to be of utmost importance in narrative and the surrounding narrative can heavily affect presentation of "factual" evidence. Argumentative claims and philosophic positions are quite likely to reside in the mythic elements that occupy central places in the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, since these texts posit discursive positions on issues they present sparse evidence in support of; instead, the continuation of the dialogues seem to rely upon the acceptance of the "truth" of the mythic elements, without excessive questioning.

Narrative analysis can be useful in extracting the thematic and plot characteristics that contribute to a certain position being presented to the audience. Foss (1996) details many elements of the actual narrative that can be examined for emergent arguments and claims; this inquiry will focus on the themes the mythic narratives in the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita* advance regarding the nature of the soul, the role of rebirth, and the general path to salvation. By closely examining the textual artifacts of these two works, descriptions of these themes can be reconstructed in a critical fashion. These reconstructions then enable the comparison of the philosophic positions that these seemingly "non-philosophic" elements put forward. The support for the truth of these narrative arguments and positions is largely internal to the audience; the audience will accept the positions that "ring true" to their values and experiences. Fisher (1987) provides guidance on examining the possibility for audience acceptance or rejection of these narratives, but this exploration will be postponed due to space limitations. One such study has been undertaken by Stroud (2000a) in relation to audience reaction to the narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The translation of the *Phaedrus* to be used that of Hackforth, found in Hamilton and Cairns (1989). References will be made to the Stephanus pagination of this work. Deutsch's (1968) highly regarded translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* will be used in this inquiry. Citations of this work will be made to chapter and verse number (i.e. 5:34). This paper now proceeds to examine the philosophical themes within Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Thematic Analysis

The ancient narratives of the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita* use mythic elements to address three important themes: the nature of the soul, the role of rebirth and moral worth, and the general route to salvation. It should be noted that this paper will not address all of the *Phaedrus*, as there are parts that rely on logical argumentation that fall outside of the scope of myth. Instead, the key elements within the *Phaedrus* that rely on the mythic narrative to convey important philosophical truths shall be examined. This section will examine what each of these texts posits in relation to the previously mentioned themes.

The Nature of the Soul

The *Phaedrus* is ostensively a dialogue about love and the function of rhetoric. In the course of speaking on these topics, however, Socrates resorts to a myth in explaining the role of love in one's "remembering" of the forms. This myth offers little in the way of support for its claims, yet it does function in an important fashion by making certain claims about the nature of the human soul. According to the *Phaedrus*, the soul is said to be immortal; Socrates indicates, "soul is not born and does not die" (245e). While he does begin to provide some reasoned arguments for this claim of immortality, the dialogue quickly turns to myth to provide it with dialogic support. Suffice it to say that the myth is prefaced by the claim that an individual's soul is immortal and does not change. The conclusion is reached that the soul is what moves the human body (Taylor, 1936).

Socrates and Phaedrus, however, want to discuss the nature of the human soul and the relation this has to love. This necessitates the introduction of mythic elements into this narrative, as Socrates indicates, "What manner of thing it [the soul] is would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it, but what it resembles, that a man might tell in briefer compass. Let this therefore be our manner of discourse" (246a). The truths that this dialogue needs to continue its exploration are not accessible through rational discourse, defined by the giving of reasons and evidence; instead, a narrative is to be told that hopefully resonates with the participant's held values and beliefs on this topic. Socrates resorts to myth to make his position on love, and this myth is not so much a true description of the matter as it is the best resemblance of the matter.

The conversation then progresses into the nature of the human soul and its constituent parts. Socrates indicates the mythic description of the soul, stating,

> . Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer. . .
> . With us men, in the first place, it is a pair of steeds that the charioteer controls; moreover, one of them is noble and good, and of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, and his stock is opposite. Hence the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome. (246a-b).

When the soul is perfect, "it journeys on high and controls the whole world, but one that has shed its wings sinks down until it can fasten on something solid, and settling there it takes to itself an earthly body" (246c).

These mythic elements within this narrative posit the soul to be perfect when it is not attached to the earthly form, and "imperfect" when it has descended to the plane correlated with bodily existence. It is at this point that the constituent parts of the soul gain importance, as one will notice in the following sections. For now, it will serve to note that the two steeds symbolize conflicting attributes of one's soul that the "charioteer" is to control--the noble nature and the base nature. The good steed seems defined by its desire to ascend toward the heights of heaven, whereas the wickedness of the bad steed is delineated by its attraction to base, earthly desires. Thus, Socrates describes the soul as composed of three parts: a controlling factor (the charioteer), inclinations toward noble contemplation (the good, ascending steed), and base/wicked desires (the earthly, bad steed).

The religious-philosophical narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita* also makes some claims as to the nature of the soul. This dialogue centers on Krishna discussing all the moral and metaphysical reasons why Arjuna should take part in a war against his own kin. Krishna, in his persuasion directed at Arjuna, makes little use of reasons and evidence; instead, relying on his ethos as the divine avatar in human instantiation, he provides mythic accounts of what the ultimate nature of the human soul is. In doing so, he provides a narrative that accounts for the constituent parts of the human soul. Krishna indicates that he, as the ultimate substratum of being, forms the ultimate Self, which is distinguished from the empirical self (soul) that each human believes that they possess. In regard to this Self (ultimate soul), he states, "It is never born, nor does it die" (2:20).

This narrative introduces the idea that the world and the self/soul one typically thinks of as being "real" is an illusion. The real meaning of one's "self" is in relation to the "ultimate" Self, personified by

Krishna in human guise. It is this Self that is described as "The Self of all beings" (2:30). Krishna continues this explanation by saying "I [Krishna as the personification of ultimate Self] am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature...all life [is] my manifestation" (6:30). Even the perceived change in the world all takes place within the ultimate metaphysical reality of the Self; "The birth and dissolution of the cosmos takes place in me. There is nothing that exists separate from me" (7:6-7). Even the multiplicity of forms one observes in everyday life has its basis in ultimate self; "all the different qualities found in living creatures have their source in me" (10:5). Even the creatures themselves (including humans) are all fundamentally united with the ultimate Self; "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature, Arjuna, and the beginning, middle, and end of there existence"(10:20). The typical individuation that we intuitively sense about our existence is an illusion; *Brahman*, or ultimate Self, is the true reality.

This true reality gets lost to the illusions of self (soul) we egoistically create due to the play of the three *gunas*. Discussing the constituents of the "illusory" soul (self), Krishna points out, "[these] states of *sattvas*, *rajas*, and *tamas* come from me [ultimate Self], but I am not in them. These three *gunas* deceive the world: people fail to look beyond them to me, supreme and imperishable"(7:12-13). The illusion of ego and separateness from the ultimate Self are enabled by these shadow-like illusions of the *gunas*. This narrative portrays the soul in two lights; in the true light of the metaphysical connectedness of all beings, hence all souls are one Self/Soul, and in the illusory light, the individual soul drawn by the interaction of three qualities (the *gunas*).

The illusory soul of the individual is composed of the "knower of the field" (13:1) and some combination of the qualities of *sattvas*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. The "knower" is the *Atman-Brahman*, or eternal witness (Self) within the illusory individual. It is the "beginningless supreme *Brahman* who is called neither being nor non-being" (13:12). This is that which perceives, that which is pulled by the *gunas*, and that which is, at the same time, free from the trappings of desire and sensation associated with any particular human body. The "field," or the individuated existence, is the physical and material world, *prakriti*, which houses actions and occurrences caused by the combination of the three *gunas* (the qualities of the material world that determine action). *Sattvas* is described as the quality that is "illuminating and healthy. It binds by attachment to happiness and by attachment to knowledge" (14:6). *Rajas* is portrayed as "the nature of desire whose source is thirst and attachment" (14:7). *Tamas* is the quality that is "born of ignorance, the deluder of all embodied beings. It binds . . . by carelessness, indolence, and sleep" (14:8). Thus, the illusory soul of the individual is described by this narrative as being composed of the Self (*Atman-Brahman*) and the qualities of the *gunas*. These particular qualities that bind the Self to the illusion of individuated self are the *gunas*; these range from attachment to happiness and knowledge to action and lethargy.

The Role of Rebirth and Moral Value

Given Socrates' description of the constituent parts of the soul, the *Phaedrus* progresses to describe the role of mythic rebirth and the relationships involving moral worth. The good elements of the soul attempt to ascend to the realm of true being; while gods can partake of the nourishment that "reason and knowledge" (247d) there can bestow, ordinary souls often are not able to reach this level, "sucked down as they travel they trample and tread upon one another" (248a) at the hands of their wicked steed. One's ability to ascend depends on the nourishment one's wings receive; Socrates indicates, "Now by these excellences [divine attributes of fairness, wisdom, and goodness] especially is the soul's plumage nourished and fostered, while by their opposites, even by ugliness and evil, it is wasted and destroyed" (246e).

Given this myth of the soul and its powers of ascension, Socrates introduces the "ordinance of Necessity" (248c). Of the souls that have followed "in the train of a god, and discerned something of truth, shall be kept from sorrow until a new revolution" (248c), and are thus secure from earthly entrapment. The unfortunate soul, however, that "comes to be burdened with a load of forgetfulness and wrongdoing . . sheds her wings and falls to the earth" (248c). This results in that soul being born into a particular earthly body; Socrates describes these various rebirths due to one's accumulated moral worth or lack thereof, stating,

> In her first birth she shall not be planted in any brute beast, but the soul that hath seen the most of being shall enter into the human babe that shall grow into a seeker after wisdom or beauty, a follower of the Muses and a lover; the next, having seen less, shall dwell in a king that abides by law, or a warrior and ruler; the fourth in an athlete, or physical trainer, or physician; the fifth shall

> have the life of a prophet or a Mystery priest; to the sixth that of a poet or other imitative artist shall be fittingly given; the seven shall live in an artisan or farmer; the eighth in a Sophist or demagogue; the ninth in a tyrant. (248d)

Socrates is using the idea of moral causality to correlate the worth of a soul to the earthly body it is first forced to inhabit. The more one has seen of the true realm of being, the higher one is placed on the range of humans that have some chance of attaining a vision of the ultimate reality again.

One's actions while in this human form are also linked through moral correlation to results in the next incarnation. Socrates states, "Now in all these incarnations he who lives righteously has a better lot for his portion, and he who lives unrighteously a worse" (248d). If this soul has continued to choose the "philosophical life, regains thereby her wings, and speeds away after three thousand years" (249a). The other souls, acting in accordance with wickedness, are judged and sentenced to "places of chastisement beneath the earth, while others are born aloft by Justice to a certain region of the heavens, there to live in such manner as is merited by their past life in the flesh" (249a). After a thousand years of commensurate punishment, these individual souls choose their next rebirth, "each according to her will" (249b). It is then that "the soul of a man enters in the life of a beast, and the beast's soul that was aforetime in a man goes back to a man again. For only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into this our human form" (249b). Thus, the choice of one's rebirth is important in that it provides a framework from which one can act; these actions, in turn, allow for favorable judgment in the realms of heaven or the underworld, or perhaps even facilitate one's retrieval of his or her wings.

The *Bhagavad Gita* also addresses the issue of rebirth and correlation with moral worth, albeit through the doctrine of *karma* (Flood, 1996). Krishna points out that "there is no one who rests for even an instant; every creature is driven to action by his own nature" (3:5). Thus, Arjuna must act in the situation he finds himself in; retreat and inaction are not options. The true sense of being that Arjuna aims for is enlightenment; Krishna indicates that he should "seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth of spiritual awareness" (2:49). This attitude of detachment comes from the dispelling of the empirical self; "they live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart" (2:55).

This state of perfection, while it must be aimed for in each life, will only occur as the result of many lives. Krishna indicates, "At the end of many births, the man of wisdom approaches Me. . . . Such a great self is difficult to find" (7:19). If one does not emphasize the correct qualities or *gunas*, then rebirth will come with a detrimental impact. The mythic narrative continues by indicating the plight of those that fall short of perfection, "he who has fallen from yoga is born in the house of the pure and prosperous; Or he may be born in the family of wise yogins; There he acquires the mental characteristics associated with his previous existence, and he strives from that point on to perfection" (6:41-43). Through emphasizing the trait of *sattvas* through many lives, one can be released from this cycle of rebirth, and one's actions facilitate that by resulting in better and more efficacious births along the way toward this goal. If one emphasizes *rajas* (greed), then one is "born among those attached to action" (4:15). If *tamas* (darkness) is emphasized in one's actions and character, "he is born in the wombs of the deluded" (4:15). These individuals who live filled with egoism, greed, and anger are thrown "back into the cycle of existence, into demoniac wombs; Having fallen into demoniac wombs, these deluded ones, from birth to death, do not attain Me . . . they go to the lowest place" (6:19-20). The contextualized meaning of this rebirth can be highlighted by the classic commentary of Adi Sankara (686-718 A.D.), who elucidates the meaning of demoniac wombs as the "wombs of cruel beings such as tigers, lions and the like" (1992, p. 424). He glosses "the lowest place" as "a condition which is still lower (than they are in at present)" (p. 424). Thus, rebirth occurs due to the influence of one's moral worth, or *karma* as the tradition labels it (Klostermaier, 1998). One's subsequent birth either enables one to become perfected through action, or encourages more detrimental action that leads to further ensnarement in the circle of birth and death.

The Path of Salvation

Socrates, in the *Phaedrus*, does pronounce a general path on which "salvation" can be attained. The audience of this work is offered certain actions and attitudes based within the mythic narrative; it is helpful to highlight the fact that many of the "reasons" and pieces of support Socrates provides for the way an individual should behave are rooted in the myth; hence, they become less free-standing premises and more elaborations upon the given mythic story. At any rate, the story of the winged chariot and its steeds does provide a framework from which Socrates can describe the general guidelines of action aimed at "salvation" of the soul.

The myth describes the souls who act like the philosopher as ascending to the realm of pure being. This is based in the description of the constituent parts of the soul that Socrates offered at the beginning of this mythic narrative; the good steed attempts to rise to the higher realms, whereas the wicked steed drags the charioteer down, eventually costing the soul its wings when it is born into human form. The soul in the human body can attempt to regain its wings through being reborn in better forms and places, due to beneficial actions. Socrates extends the myth to cover what actions the Phaedrus (and the audience) are to undertake; he states, "if a man makes right use of such means of remembrance [recalling what he or she saw in the train of the gods], and ever approaches to the full vision of the perfect mysteries, hē and he alone becomes truly perfect" (249c). Thus, actively trying to recall those wondrous things that one partook in following the gods into the realm of pure being is what can enable one to become perfect again (hence, winged and bodiless). Seeking the divine is portrayed as one "standing aside from the busy doings of mankind, and drawing nigh to the divine" (249c-d).

The path, according to this myth, is for one to regain this vision of the highest realm, a very difficult task for an earth-bound soul to accomplish. As Socrates indicates, "every human soul has, by reason of her nature, had contemplation of true being; else she would never have entered into this human creature; but to be put in mind thereof by things here is not easy for every soul" (249e-250a). It seems that the base steed is very tempted by wickedness, especially in conditions of the flesh. Thus, many souls in human form risk forgetting the very path to enlightenment, focusing instead on "deeds of unrighteousness, wherefore they [embodied souls] forgot the holy objects of their vision" (250a). The base temptations of earthly desire seem to be the element that dims the soul's perception of that which is truly divine—the realm of pure being.

Love is the enjoined path to this state of perfection, for it is through love that individuals can remember the vision of the highest realm that they have forgotten. Love is the instantiated quality of the form beauty, which Socrates praises as the one that "shone brightly amidst these visions, and in this world below we apprehend it through the clearest of our senses, clear and resplendent" (250d). The soul in human form readily follows and admires that which it finds as beautiful, often engendering the state of love. This is a slow process, for Socrates states, "he whose vision of the mystery is long past, or whose purity has been sullied, cannot pass swiftly hence to see beauty's self yonder, when he beholds that which is called beautiful here" (250e). This results in love being initiated with a focus on carnal interactions and desires. After the feeling deepens and the respect for the other grows, the individual's wings begin to grow again, resulting in discomfort and anxiety. This partner of the lover is grows into an "object of his veneration and worship" (252d), eventually allowing the individual the chance to control the wicked steed in a more permanent fashion. The soul is said to

> draw them on, and now they are quite close and behold the spectacle of the beloved flashing upon them [the steeds]. At that sight the driver's memory goes back to that form of beauty, and he sees her once again enthroned by the side of temperance upon her holy seat; then in awe and reverence he falls upon his back, and therewith is compelled to pull the reins so violently that he brings both steeds down on their haunches, the good one willing and unresistant, but the wanton sore against his will. (254b-c)

The lover sees in the beloved the holy image of the realm he or she once inhabited; indeed, the grandeur of this vision forces the charioteer down, and with him or her, the steeds. Again and again the wicked steed attempts to defile the beloved with carnal urges, but the charioteer continues to restrain it, "until the evil steed casts off his wantonness; humbled in the end, he obeys the counsel of his driver, and when he sees the fair beloved is like to die of fear. Wherefore at long last the soul of the lover follows after the beloved with reverence and awe" (254e).

Thus, the ultimate result of true love is the restraint and control of the base steed, facilitating the soul's regrowing of its wings and acting in a noble fashion toward the beloved, as a prelude to the life that will be experienced in the realm of pure being. These lovers are duly bound for this realm; Socrates indicates,

> When death comes they quit the body wingless indeed, yet eager to be winged . . . it is ordained that all such as have taken the first steps on the celestial highway shall no more return to the dark pathways beneath the earth, but shall walk together in a life of shining bliss, and be furnished in due time with like plumage the one to the other, because of their love. (256d-e)

Love, in the *Phaedrus*, is connected with a myth of the soul such that a path of action is engendered that leads from carnal emotions to a reverence surrounding the beloved that allows for a transcendence of base desires (i.e., the taming of the evil steed).

The *Bhagavad Gita* also supplies a mythic path on which Arjuna (and the audience) can proceed toward salvation. The fundamental impetus for action is the recognition that action is unavoidable and that the self is an illusion. Given these two claims, one must try to act in such a way as to not deny the reality of ultimate Self. Krishna describes the attributes of an enlightened person to Arjuna; "his intelligence is firmly established whose senses are completely withdrawn from the objects of sense" (2:68). By equating your self with the ultimate Self in all beings, the stakes are immense; "He who abandons all desires and acts without longing, without self-interest or egoism, he attains peace" (2:71). This peace is the ultimate liberation from personal confinement in the body; "This is the eternal state, O Partha (Arjuna); having attained it, one is no longer confused. Fixed in it even at the time of death, one attains to the bliss of *Brahman*" (2:72). Arjuna is told to "Perform thy allotted work . . . perform thy action free from attachment" (3:8-9) and "being free from desire and selfishness, fight freed from thy sorrow" (3:30). The overarching theme is that action should be performed with the realization that ego is an illusion; selfless action leads to liberation from the trap of ego attachment.

The knowledge that one enshrines in the maxims of his or her actions should be, according to Krishna's teachings, based in *sattvas*, for "That knowledge by which the one imperishable Being is seen in all beings, undivided in the divided, know that knowledge to be *sattvic*" (18:20). Thus, actions stemming from this determinant will focus on a selfless and non-attached support of the moral order, *dharma*. The other *gunas*, *rajas* and *tamas*, lead one to act selfishly and to dwell on the objects of the senses. Krishna explicates the resulting action based in *sattvas*, stating, "An action which is obligatory, which is performed free from attachment and without desire or hate by one who is undesirous of its fruit, is said to be *sattvic*" (18:23). Arjuna is thus pushed toward fighting in this war because it is his duty as a *kshatriya* (a warrior/leader), and sustains the world order as long as he acts in a non-attached way. If he were to fight or to flee based solely upon consideration of empirical matters, such as the safety of himself, his loved ones, or concern for victory/defeat, he would be failing his obligation to his position in society and would be reifying the delusion that he is the doer and that the empirical incentives are ultimately real.

Krishna indicates that one should "always perform the work that has to be done without attachment, for man attains the Supreme by performing work without attachment" (3:19). Duty is textured with the idea of non-attachment; one is to simply "do his or her duty" and do it with a sense of non-attachment in regard to the consequences (the fruits) of this action. In this way, the knowledge of the illusion of individuation can be reinforced with action that also denies the primacy of the empirical self. If one is ensnared in the illusion of the empirical ego, one's *karma* will result in one being reborn into that very illusion that one is attached to; Krishna states, "*karma* is the name of the creative power that causes beings to exist" (8:3). Thus, the enlightened person, through non-attachment to actions, realizes the illusion of the empirical self and can transcend his or her *karmic* debt. These individuals, focusing on the teachings of Krishna, attain salvation.

Another related tactic for salvation lies within leaving the illusion of the empirical soul/self through devotion to Krishna. Krishna states, "Those who, fixing their mind on Me, worship Me with complete discipline and with supreme faith, them I consider to be the most learned in yoga" (12:7). This single-pointed love of the deity, like non-attached action in regard to duty, brings about the realization that one's physical self is an illusion; the true reality is *Brahman*, the underlying ultimate Self that serves as the substratum for existence. By focusing on Krishna as the instantiation of *Brahman*, the mind can attain enlightenment; Krishna indicates that this path also results in abandonment of the fruits of action, stating, "resort to My yoga and renounce the fruit of all action . . .better than meditation is the renunciation of the fruit of action, for from renunciation peace immediately comes" (12:11-12). Whether one renounces the fruit of action through upholding duty or through devotion to Krishna, the illusion of the empirical self (soul) is discarded, and one is able to identify with the Self of all things, freed from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Mythic Convergences and Divergences

With the reconstruction of the positions within the mythic narratives complete, this paper can now examine the emergent positions of these two philosophical texts. Remarks will be grouped around the three topics of the nature of the soul, the role of rebirth and moral value, and the general path to

salvation. One major difference that weaves through all of these themes is the foundational presupposition of the self as either a collective or as individuated.

The Nature of the Soul

These two works construct similar mythic pictures of the human soul and its constituent parts. The key elements seem to be the "noble" and the "base" elements; in the *Phaedrus*, the good steed and the evil steed are both attracted to opposite qualities, the noble and the base. It is the influence of the good steed that propels the chariot toward the realm of true being, where reason provide the most exquisite nourishment for one's wings. The base is best described as earthly, as is the desire that comes hand in hand with bodily existence. The soul is supposed to overcome these attachments to once again fly toward the heavens. In a similar light, the *Bhagavad Gita* postulates similar constituents to the soul, fearing that the base elements will overcome the noble. Both Socrates and Krishna portray the noble elements as striving for knowledge and wisdom, as opposed to earthly actions and greedy desire after sensuous entities. Thus, *sattvas* is seen as striving for intelligence and happiness, a similar end point to the good steed and its pasturage amongst the fields of true being. As is evident in the theme of salvation, the base elements in the soul provide for transcendence to a higher realm of existence or thought; both Socrates' philosopher and Krishna's yogi are ruled by the noble qualities while resisting the detrimental influences of the base qualities.

The two myths, however, diverge in two ways concerning the nature of the soul. First, the quantity of soul constituents differs. The description expounded by Socrates includes two steeds or qualities of the mind—one noble and one base. The system explained by Krishna includes three such qualities—each emphasizing knowledge, action/attachment, and laziness, respectively. This highlights a divergence between the two systems in relation to the ease at which one can do the good. Krishna's description seems to stack the deck against noble action, with two out of the three qualities that could rule the individual being base in nature and non-desirable. In Socrates' system, the soul has a simple choice to make—one quality leads upward and the other propels one downward.

The second major difference between the two systems is that of the ultimate nature of the soul. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates seems to keep as a foundation of his myth the individuated notion of the soul; indeed, the soul is described as simple and unchanging (unmoved). The charioteer seems to be the identity of the "active" part of the soul, controlling and struggling with the two steeds. This soul, in turn, is individuated from all other souls in that it is pursuing a quest to regain its wings and ascend to the realm of pure being were it once was. The myth leaves out any discussion of the individuation of the soul disappearing once this realm has been attained; this unity, if it was postulated, would also appear to contradict the utility of this myth in the dialogue, which is to explain how each individual can remember a realm of ideas that he or she was once a part of. Thus, the myth seems to leave the souls as atomic selves, separated from each other in everything but their common quest. The *Bhagavad Gita*, on the other hand, sees the notion of the self and soul as ultimately an illusion. It is this illusion that must be transcended so that the "individual" realizes that he or she is not an individual, but instead the Self of all things and beings. At the illusory level, the *gunas* are introduced to causally describe the functioning of the material world, but the myth ends with this world being an illusion that one is to transcend. Thus, the ultimate nature of the soul/self lies within the Self, *Atman-Brahman* or the underlying substratum of reality. This is a major presupposition that will emerge in later conflicts between these two myths.

The Role of Rebirth and Moral Value

The myth in the *Phaedrus* portrays rebirth as being correlated with moral worth. As moral worth tends to increase in the individuals that lack wings, the chance for births in a human of philosophic temperament increases. Both texts point to this process being long and arduous; Socrates describes a process of three thousand years and Krishna talks of sages coming along once in a thousand births. Yet both myths portray the thinking individual as being the ideal target for rebirth, due to the increased likelihood that in that person the desires can be transcended and conquered, leading one to either participation in the realm of true being or in liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The myths diverge, however, in some significant ways. Initially, the two processes of rebirth deviate on how much individual choice they allow. For instance, Socrates' process begins with the wingless individual being reborn into human form based upon their closeness to a state of true knowledge. After living and acting in that life, however, the virtuous individual gets to choose their next birth after three thousand years. Thus, some humans can choose to be beasts and some humans that are beasts currently can choose to be humans once again. The individual receives the power to choose the

framework from which they can pursue enlightenment; the choice of a human birth is an obvious advantage in this regard. The *Bhagavad Gita*, on the other hand, differs significantly from this view in that the individuals earn their rebirth through the activities of *karma*. While their desires in this life cause them to have a commensurate rebirth, no process involving individual choice at the time of rebirth exists in its mythic framework. The rebirth is dependent upon the accumulated moral worth or lack thereof; the beast-like individual is forced into the wombs of the deluded or of a beast itself. Hence, the *Bhagavad Gita*'s view of rebirth takes on more of a retributive function than that of the Socratic description, as the framework one is assigned for the next life is based upon the actions within the proceeding life. The Hindu notion of *karma* seems to continually place the individual in a "deeper" pit of attachment that they must escape than the Socratic idea of rebirth; instead of individual choice, the individual in Krishna's description is forced into births that result in ever-increasing forces that compel base behavior.

Another major difference is in regard to the temporal placing of the ideal realm and one's "fall" from it. Socrates describes the realm of pure being as one in which individuals originate and then proceed to stay within or descend to earthly existence. Either way, the temporal sequence of events begins in the realm of true being, proceeding to human existence. This is a linear notion of salvation, with the time-line progressing from perfection to imperfection to a regained perfection (if one is fortunate). The *Bhagavad Gita*, on the other hand, does not place *Brahman* (Self) as that from which all originates in a temporal sequence; instead, it is seen as the heart of being within all creatures at all times. The idea of time itself seems to be an illusion confined to the empirical world of bodies, wars, and consequences of actions; for instance, Krishna tells Arjuna about the impending war,

> One man believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay? (2:19-21).

This quotation highlights the divide between the temporal and the timeless in the *Bhagavad Gita*; the empirical world is temporally bound and experiences changes, but the world of *Atman-Brahman* (Self) is timeless—one does not "return" to it with the empirical self in control and one does not originate from it like one originated from one's mother. Instead, it is the foundation from which the illusion of the empirical world gains its ability to exist; when one identifies him or herself with the empirical self, the illusion is sustained and the individual is reborn in the individuated world. When the individual finds the basis of their personality in the timeless Self, the empirical self can be discarded, along with change, temporal sequences, causality, etc.

Both of the differences concerning the choice of certain rebirths and the temporal ordering of rebirth seem intimately connected to the respective notions of self in both traditions. The *Bhagavad Gita* sees the true locus of being in a collective entity, labeled the Self; individuation is merely the epistemological corruption of this metaphysical truth. Hence, Arjuna is urged to act and to uphold his duty without concern for the fruits he may accrue; in doing so, the illusion of his empirical self being ultimately real is assailed. The Socratic notion, as portrayed through the mythic elements of the *Phaedrus*, pictures the self as being ultimately individualistic; while it is not equivalent with the human self or personality, it is still one soul among many in the realm of being. Thus, this individualistic emphasis may push Socrates to recount a myth that allows for some personal (atomic) autonomy in regard to the correlation of moral worth and rebirth, whereas the *Bhagavad Gita* portrays the relationship as a strict causal one, in which the individual attached to their empirical self gets the rebirth that is warranted. The temporal aspects can also be related to this notion of the self; the Socratic process seems more like a journey of the soul from perfection back to perfection, whereas the notion espoused by Krishna is one of transcendence. Journeys presuppose a traveler; the Hindu notion that emerges from this myth is that the individual is an illusion that must be discarded along with temporally conditioned worries, such as the causality associated with actions, desires, etc.

The Path to Salvation

Both myths place the avoidance of desire in an exalted position in the quest for salvation. Whether it is in the form of the evil steed or in *rajas/tamas*, the base nature of desire and earthly wants needs to be overcome for the individual to reach a perfected state of being. Both myths give the idea of love a privileged position due to its utility in facilitating salvation and enlightenment. Love of Krishna and love of a beloved both result in the overcoming of attachments to worldly desires and lusts, thus

allowing the individual to grow in the direction of this newfound self-control. These similarities, however, are only basic equivalences; at a much deeper level, some differences emerge.

A divergence of interest is the value placed upon the locus of one's quest for salvation by these two myths. Socrates advocates the pursuit of salvation outside of society, indicating the higher births as those that think, and the lower births as those that simply act. As an example of the later category, the ruler/warrior is placed rather low on the initial hierarchy of rebirth, which is commensurate with one's recollection of the realm of true being. Indeed, the philosophical mind seems better able to recollect the forms through dialectic and the practice of love, which ultimately enables the visions of true being to be seen in clear recollection. In distinction from this view is that of the *Bhagavad Gita*; Krishna's conception of the "thinker" is less valued that Socrates. Discursive thinking is opposed by Krishna in that even his statements on knowledge equate to a more meditative and calming practice of the mind. Even while the *Brahmin* (priest) uses such thought to achieve salvation, Krishna also speaks salvation through the execution of one's caste-bound duty. He states, "Even the wise man acts in conformity with his own nature. Beings follow nature . . . Better one's own *dharma*, though imperfect, than another's well performed. Better death in (the fulfillment of) one's own law, for anther's law is dangerous" (3:33-35). Later in the text, Krishna indicates the four major "natural roles" that individuals fall into and from which their duties derive; "The actions of *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, and *Vaishyas*, and of *Shudras*, O conqueror of the foe, are distinguished according to the *gunas* that arise from their innate nature" (18:41). *Brahmins*, or priests, are characterized by "Calmness, self-control, austerity, purity, patience, uprightness, wisdom, knowledge and religious belief . . . born of his nature" (18:42). The nature of *Kshatriyas*, or warriors/nobles, include, "Heroism, majesty, firmness, skill and not fleeing in battle, generosity and lordship" (18:43). Krishna describes the action and nature of the *Vaishya*, or merchant, as "Agriculture, cattle-tending and trade" (18:44). At a similar, albeit subservient, level are the *Shudras*, or servant/laborer class; Krishna points out that "action whose character is service is likewise that of the *Shudra*, born of his nature" (18:44). These characterizations are important in the *Bhagavad Gita* because, Krishna argues, "A man obtains perfection by being devoted to his own proper action" (18:45). Thus, duty is inherent in the abstract characterizations of the four castes. This text seems to allow more latitude for favorable rebirth and salvation than the simple criterion of recollection advanced by Socarates in the *Phaedrus*.

Another point of divergence in these two narratives is the emphasis they place on the actual goal of enlightenment. The Socratic position arising from this myth is that enlightenment is the remembrance of a past state of bliss, and the concurrent attempt to get "back" to it. The mythic narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita*, on the other hand, anticipates a state in which individuality is effaced. Thus, the western myth sees salvation mainly through the lens of romantic hindsight, whereas the eastern text portrays salvation through anticipation. This fact is quite interesting when given the standard characterization of the western world as striving towards a progressive goal; it seems that even if this societal goal is actually progressed toward, its very conception lies in the past—i.e., its portrayal in terms of a perfect state in the metaphysical past of the individual in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The eastern world, on the other hand, might have received various mischaracterizations as not being oriented toward improvement or progress, as the myth of the *Bhagavad Gita* shows; indeed, the very heart of Krishna's instructions is to enable the individual to reach a state he or she has not reached before—the erasure of individuation.

This past/future orientation of the two myths also arises in regard to the ontological state of the agent; in the Socratic scheme, the individual perceived the realm of true being and can remember it because of his or her stable individuation. Being the same individual that perceived the forms, the agent can recall them, given the correct conditions, and start down the path to salvation. An example of this is Socrates' description of the two lovers; he states that they "shall walk together in a life of shining bliss, and be furnished in due time with like plumage the one to the other, because of their love" (256e). The final state of the agent in the myth that Socrates describes is individuated, with separate individuals such as the two lovers "surviving" death intact. This appears to be required by the Socratic position in general, since its conception of the soul and the notion of rebirth is tied to a stable personality and being—for instance, it is Socrates' soul that will survive the hemlock in the *Phaedo*, and it is Socrates' soul that can achieve salvation and enjoy the benefits in the *Phaedrus*.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, on the other hand, portrays the empirical individual as ultimately illusory; thus, agency in this myth is radically different than in the *Phaedrus*. Ontologically, one's attachment to the empirical soul or self is a condition constituted by attachment to the fruits of action and desire.

Overcoming this attachment means overcoming one's individuality, especially at death since an enlightened "one" does not acquire rebirth in a further form. It is this rebirth that unites the activities of the *gunas* with the "knower of the field" to produce individuation; Krishna states, "Whatever being is born, immovable or moving, know . . . that it (arises) from the union of the field and the knower of the field" (8:26). Our individuation is a by-product of the ontological state we currently inhabit and wish to escape, the cycle of birth and rebirth. The wise person, who is actively traversing the path to enlightenment, is described by Krishna as "He who sees the supreme Lord abiding equally in all beings, not perishing when they perish, he (truly) sees" (8:27). The very concept of the "agent" is one tainted by individuation introduced in this illusory world; subtracting the *gunas* and their trappings of the flesh, all that is left is the eternal witness of Self, *Atman-Brahman*.

Conclusion

The mythic narratives contained within the texts, the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, contain many interesting areas of divergence and convergence. Through addressing the three important and interrelated topics of the nature of the soul/self, the role of rebirth, and the path to salvation, these texts allow one to reconstruct their philosophical claims in such a way as to highlight the convergences and divergences. Significant differences emerge between these two narratives due to the foundational conception of the self that each adopts; the *Phaedrus* seems to assume the self is individuated and atomic, whereas the *Bhagavad Gita* posits a unifying Self that is the monistic substratum of all being. While portions of these narratives blur the differences between these two positions, the emergent claims appear to be intimately connected with this continuum of individuation/collectivization of the soul.

It is this dichotomy that modern empirical research in interpersonal and intercultural communication has supported. Research finds that issues of "self" can be crucially important to the success and continuation of communicative practices by potential participants (Barrett, 1998). McCroskey and Richmond (1996) notice this emphasis on relationships and group orientation (i.e. collective emphasis on the Self) in communication in eastern discourse:

> While individualism, competition, and straightforward communication are highly valued in most western societies, eastern societies have higher values for congeniality, cooperation, and indirect communication which will protect the "face" of the people interacting. Maintaining valued relationships is generally seen as more important than exerting influence and control over others. (p. 238)

Instead of the western ideal of "command and control" by the individual in regard to the goals of rhetorical action, eastern traditions often aim for the maintenance of relationships while interacting with others. This stems from the emphasis placed on the group or social caste as an integral part to a unified whole that is common in eastern cultures (Gangal & Hosterman, 1982; Oliver, 1971).

Scollon and Scollon (1995) find the basis for many behaviors designed to protect the "face" (self image) of the participants as being related to these issues of community (i.e., caste and social group membership). They argue that

> there is reason to believe the "self" projected by Asians is a more collectivistic "self," one which is more connected to membership in basic groups such as the family or one's working group and which is taken to be more strongly under the influence of assumed or unmarked cultural assumptions about face. (p. 36)

Thus, issues of group affiliation and protection of the other participant's "face" in the discourse are important characteristics in the eastern tradition and seem integrally tied to a more collectivistic ideal of the self. One protects the other in interaction because he or she is conceived of as an extension of oneself, not merely as object to be utilized toward some goal (Stroud, 2000b).

The idea of the self as atomic and quite personal appears to be embedded in Socrates' use of myth in the *Phaedrus*. The idea of an individual perceiving the forms, falling from this knowledge, and utilizing another person to regain this knowledge privileges such an individual conception of the self that is absent from the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is this distinction drawn from these myths that helps one understand the emergent philosophical positions within these two texts and sheds light on modern presuppositions of interaction and self that eastern cultures possess. This study has expanded the research involving both philosophical topics and myths, illustrating that Plato used mythic elements to advance philosophic claims at the heart of the western philosophical tradition. After examining the methodology of narrative, this inquiry was able to apply it to the *Phaedrus* and the *Bhagavad Gita* in order to extract the philosophical positions on the nature of the soul, the role of rebirth, and the path to salvation. After these

positions were reconstructed from the texts, a discussion was initiated as to how these positions differed from the eastern and western textual vantage points. This has lead up to the conclusion that the fundamental difference in these traditions, as instantiated in these texts, is the conception of the self as individuated or as a unity/collective. Future research must continue to examine other Hindu texts and latter Platonic dialogues to discern if this dichotomy weakens or if the traditions continue down the path of divergence over conceptualizations of self in their use of *mythos*.

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